IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES

April 21, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 John 3:18-24
John 10:11-18

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."
-Psalm 23:5

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

Those words are at least 2,500 years old. They have been memorized by children; they have comforted the sick and brought peace to the dying; precious words, loved more perhaps than any other words. There is no pastor about to enter the hospital room of a gravely ill person who has not uttered a prayer of gratitude for these ancient words.

We recite them, together in this church during the sacrament of communion. In moments of extreme duress, in the face of the worst that can happen, men and women turn to these words.

Fred Morris was a Methodist missionary in Brazil, in the the 1970s, during a time of particularly harsh military oppression. He ended up in jail because he was a friend of Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who was an outspoken critic of the government. When Morris finally was released and allowed to return home, he wrote an account of his experience for Harper's Magazine. I still have it and have never forgotten it.

He describes the methods used by his captors, carefully designed to inflict maximum pain without causing death - to persuade prisoners to confess to crimes they did not commit and to reveal names of other critics of the government.

> "The hood was pulled down over my face and I started the short walk to the torture chamber. Once more I repeated the Shepherd's Psalm, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' And again I found myself calmed by those ancient words. I wondered for a moment how many people through the centuries have used that Psalm at similar moments. I knew that no one, not even God, was going to save me from the hands of these men,

> if they decided to kill me. They had killed many others. But the Psalm confirmed in me their limited capacity to touch me where it really mattered. It strengthened me even in the face of my weakness before them." ["In the Presence of Mine Enemies," Harper's Magazine, October 1975]

That is a picture I have never been able to forget. Another image I associate with this Psalm is gentler. It comes from the first funeral at which I presided in Scotland. Scots sing the 23rd Psalm at every occasion of importance. In fact, Scots are inclined to think that the 23rd Psalm was written somewhere in the western Highlands. The funeral took place in the village where I was serving as a pastor. I was told it would be a "Highland Funeral." That meant that after a time in the small house of the deceased, the men having a "wee nip" or two in the parlor, women in the kitchen. The men stepped out into the small front garden for the service; the women remained in the house. At the conclusion of the brief service several men lifted the wooden coffin and carried it up the road a hundred yards or so - ancient Highland custom was to carry it over the first water - then it was loaded onto the back of a pick-up truck and, still men only, we got into cars and drove to the place of burial, a rough field in the dark, brooding mountains. It was raining softly, clouds shrouded the tops of the hills, and the ever-present sheep were visible and audible all around us. As the coffin was lowered the men began to sing - without prompting - the lovely metric setting of Psalm 23, accompanied by the sheep.

> "The Lord is my shepherd, I'll not want.
> He makes me down to lie...
> My table thou hast furnished
> in presence of my foes."

It's not that the images are contemporary. We are thousands of years and thousands of miles away from the two images in this beloved poem - ancient shepherd and Bedouin host. Let's close the gap a little.

Sheep were absolutely dependent on a shepherd in that dangerous desert environment: the shepherd often knew each one by name, cared for it, protected it, saw to its shelter each night in a fold, even cleansed its wounds with oil, and cupped a hand for it to drink still, not running water. There are shepherds today in Scotland, but sheep roam, individually, wander all day. They are never much of a flock actually, more like stubborn individualists. The shepherd's job is to chase them down the mountain in the evening and back up in the morning - a task occasionally done on a trail bike.

The sacred image is equally rich. "According to the Bedouin law of hospitality, once a traveler is received into the shepherd's tent, he is guaranteed immunity from enemies who may be attempting to overtake him. In pastoral cultures no human protection was greater than that afforded by a Bedouin chief." [Out of the Depths, Bernard Anderson, p. 148]

Those eloquent images account for the origin and early popularity of the Psalm but not for us. The reason this Psalm intrigues us, keeps

commending itself to us, almost haunts us theologically, is because it addressed, in poetry, the two basic religious questions:

> "Where is God and what does the notion of God have to do with my life?"

We come of age assuming God. Our mental, emotional and spiritual formation occurs under the gentle beneficence of a creator who is good, who protects us, provides for us, and to whose care and custodianship we commend all sorts of people in our trusting childish prayers. "God bless grandma, and Uncle Jack, God bless my friends, God bless the poor." God, as the saying goes, is in heaven and all is right with the world - for a while.

And then it crumbles. Someone we love very much dies: a grandparent, Uncle Jack doesn't come home from the war, or a friend is killed in an automobile accident, or a baby dies of leukemia, or we discover that the good does not always come out on top, that if God is taking care of the poor, you can't tell by looking at them.

We learn, in time, about the ambiguity of human life, we lose our theological innocence, and the notion of a good and kind and powerful God starts to fade.

Sometimes we talk about it, discuss it into the wee hours, on those luxurious days when matters such as the existence of God are important enough to keep us up past midnight.

But privately, mostly, we begin to entertain the notion that we are alone in this business, that there is nobody there, that we are essentially biological and genetic accidents in an uncaring, unfeeling universe, that Macbeth is correct:

> "Life's but a walking shadow, a
> poor player
> that struts and frets his hour
> upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is
> a tale told by an idiot, full of sound
> and fury signifying nothing."
> [Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5, line 19]

Dan Wakefield, in his spiritual autobiography, Returning, tells about his experience of agnosticism:

> "I cannot mark the day or even exactly the year that I consciously decided I had stopped being a Christian... Maybe it began with the erosion of childhood faith when I asked every day and night that (my) acne be taken away and awoke to find it still my skin, my identity, my very self." [p. 87, 88]

I believe most of us live somewhere between the innocence of childlike trust and brittle agnosticism. The academic question of the

existence of God is put on the back burner - perhaps because we come to realize that we are not going to pin it down definitely, but more likely because we can no longer stay awake past midnight to discuss things like that, even if we cast our lot with organized religion.

I believe the undercurrent continues. "Is it true? Does it matter?"

The question of God is suggested at the edges of life someone said - birth - death. So when we've lived long enough to know more about each, personally, the old question re-emerges, but it is no longer academic. Rather it returns with an urgency.

Martin Marty wrote a wonderful book, A Cry of Absence, about faith in a time of deep personal crisis in which he observed:

> "Hardened urbanites, far removed from nomadic, agrarian experience, turn in crisis to a Psalm about the Lord as shepherd. Why? Because they resonate to a passage about 'walking through the valley of the shadow of death.'" [A Cry of Absence, p. 34]

It helps to know that the 23rd Psalm was written in a time of political, social and theological crisis for God's people. Jerusalem was leveled. The Temple was flattened. God's dwelling place was no more. In the Sixth Century B.C. human tragedy and suffering forced the fundamental theological question just as today. If God doesn't have a dwelling place, a temple or an ark or an altar, where is God? Which is, as you can see, always a way of asking, "is there a God?" Or "what does the notion of God have to do with my life?" And that, I submit, is a contemporary question, as relevant today as ever. The enduring power of this poem, with its simple images, is that it makes two radical and dramatic assertions.

God is not confined to a place - not the ark of the covenant, not the holy of holies, not the Cathedral, high altar, or Presbyterian communion table. All these are reminders, only, that our God is not contingent, limited nor confined to a place, nor to a ritual, nor to anybody's creed or confession or theological system. Rather all the holy places in the world, all the religious paraphernalia, all the theology are symbols of a God who is radically involved in the life of people, in the life of the world, in the life of faith, communities and families, and in the lives of individuals as a shepherd was radically and critically involved with the life of the sheep.

That's the first matter. The second assertion is equally critical.

This Psalm suggests that God is particularly present when life in this world takes a turn for the worse, that is to say at the very moment human beings are about to throw up their hands in despair, at the very moment when the idea of a loving, caring God seems most preposterous, at the moment, that is to say, which feels most God-forsaken.

"In the presence of my enemies."

The Psalter is not at all squeamish about the fact that there are enemies and there is evil in the world. In fact, the Psalms become so humanly expressive that they make us wince sometimes. C. S. Lewis was amused at the way the Psalms go lumbering merrily along, praising God, and then, without warning:

> "of thy goodness, slay my enemies..." (143)
> "may his days be few..." (7)
> "when he is dead may his orphans be beggars..." (9)

Fortunately we Presbyterians believe that the Bible is a human document which God uses, so we are not stuck with the appalling notion that it's all inspired and that the Holy Spirit dictated instructions on how to kill your enemies' children.

The Psalms know what we know - namely that there are dark valleys through which each of us most go; that there are enemies with which we must contend; that this is not a perfect world. It is a world in which bad things happen to good people, awful things happen to innocent people who happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Mothers and children and grandparents in a bomb shelter in Baghdad when the smart bombs hit. Kurdish people encouraged to revolt and then abandoned to violence, disease and starvation. Little children gunned down coming home from school in Chicago. It's not a perfect world by any stretch of the imagination. And any religion that doesn't know that, doesn't have some way to acknowledge evil, some vocabulary to express the human dilemma, will not be worth much.

One of the most common human experiences is the absence of God. An honest spirituality needs to accommodate that, to be big and strong enough to know that people of deep faith are afraid too, brave enough to hear Jesus ask, "O God, why have you forsaken me?" and not try to explain it away.

And Hans Kung, writes about an elderly man, critically ill, who after years of skepticism, returned to God. "He needed a God," Kung explains, "against whom he could fling his complaint, his despair, his anger." He said to professor Kung, "God be praised that I have a God once more, since in my excessive pain I can permit myself a few curses and blasphemies: this sort of thing is not permitted to the atheist." [Eternal Life, p. 201]

The power of the 23rd Psalm is that it comes right out and says something we all know but rarely speak about, namely the valley of the shadow. And the redeeming idea in this beautiful poetry is that God is particularly there with us, and that precisely when the valley is dark, and there seems to be no light, no hope. When the enemy is closing in - whatever that is for you: a physical enemy, or a foe with which you have struggled all your life, an enemy like fear, or insecurity, or lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, and depression, or guilt, or obsession, or addiction which hems you in and rules you in spite of your best intentions - the redeeming word of this Psalm is that "In the presence of the enemy, God prepares a table."

Even when we're distracted, even when we are totally occupied with our illness, our pain, our anxiety, even in the midst of mortal combat, our God is with us.

As I worked on the Psalm this week, revisiting the books and reference materials that I've read many times, wondering if there might be anything fresh, I pulled a book off the shelf that was new to me. I don't know where I got it. It's an old book, so someone must have given it to me along the way. I had never looked at it, nor had anyone else, apparently. But on the page where a commentary of Psalm 23 began, I found a small laminated card - a little faded. Sir Jacob Astley's prayer before the Battle of Newbury. Astley, I discovered, was a prominent Royalist general in the English Civil War and that Newbury took place in 1643 and again in 1644. Before going into battle, Sir Jacob prayed:

> "Lord, I shall be verie busie this day. I may forget Thee but doe not Thou forget me."

It is a prayer for all of us - before battle, before facing the enemy, before surgery, before work, before the busy days which make up your life and mine.

We shall be busy this day. We may forget Thee, but do not Thou forget us.

A table is spread, even in the "presence of **our** enemies."

Five hundred years after that Psalm was written, there was one who lived out its implications, who verbalized his fear and despair on the cross, but bravely died committing himself to God's care.

It was that one, who surely knew this Psalm, who had memorized it as a child and recited it in synagogue and prayed it at home. It was that same one, Jesus the Christ, who one day said to his disciples - and to us:

"I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and they know me."

That is good news indeed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

+ + + + +

O Lord,

You prepare a table before us in the presense of our enemies;

You annoint us, care for us, love us and walk with us.

May goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives,

And may we dwell in your house, now and forever. Amen.